



The new transatlantic agenda – a view from Poland

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- *Polish foreign policy and public opinion attitudes have become more 'European' since the early Bush era, when Poland supported the invasion of Iraq. Nevertheless, Poland still differs from its key European partners such as Germany and France in its views on Russia and expects its viewpoint to be reflected in the debate on the new EU-US agenda.*
- *Poland's priorities for the new transatlantic agenda are regional rather than global. They focus on the countering of Russia's insurgence and anchoring other Eastern European countries more firmly in the Western orbit. The implementation of EU Eastern Partnership project as well as keeping NATO expansion on the agenda should be seen as tools to achieve this objective. Both US and the EU should become again more committed to assisting democracy in Eastern Europe and elsewhere in the world.*
- *The war in Georgia and the gas crisis in Ukraine have brought back regional security issues to the top of the transatlantic agenda. There is an urgent need to re-invent NATO as a regional security provider as well as to take practical steps to ensure energy security for both EU and the countries of the Eastern Europe, which are now largely dependent on Russia in this respect.*
- *Poland is willing to contribute to solving global challenges such as combating terrorism (Afghanistan), climate change or the Middle East (Iran, Israeli-Palestinian conflict) but would oppose policies which could harm its vital security interest as a 'trade off' (e.g. measures combating climate change which would increase energy dependence on Russia etc).*

1. Polish-American relations during the Bush era

The defining event of the Polish transatlantic relations during the Bush era was the war in Iraq, and the unconditional support, both political and military, given to this war by the left-wing government of Leszek Miller. At the time, the participation of the Polish troops in the occupation of Iraq had broad political support from left and right. However, it contradicted the policies of Poland's European partners, Germany and France, which were deeply opposed to the war. Their governments and (even more so) the general public blamed Poland and other new members of the EU for failing to join the Europe-wide opposition to Bush policy on Iraq and thus preventing the creation of the common European position on this issue. The Germans seemed particularly indignant about Polish 'ungratefulness' for the German support (political and financial) of Poland's EU membership and German media repeated the slogan of 'American Trojan horse in Europe'. Poland's opposition to some provisions of the so-called European constitutional treaty (especially double majority voting) further aggravated Germany's mistrust of the Polish political class.

On the other hand, many politicians and opinion-makers in Poland were appalled by a wave of what they perceived as anti-Americanism spilling across Western Europe. The urgent sense that Europe and America are drifting apart and that Poland (and other former communist countries) should do whatever was possible to prevent such a transatlantic drift was a major factor behind the signing of the 'letter of eight' in support of the Bush policy on Iraq. As Ivan Krastev put it, 'anti anti-Americanism' became the credo of the political elite in Central Europe. It consisted in the belief that Poland and other 'new Europeans' should see to it that ever more integrated Europe will position itself as a US partner rather than a 'counterbalance' to US global influence.

Following the results of 2005 elections, the new populist-nationalist government of Jaroslaw Kaczynski (as well as his brother President Lech Kaczynski) gradually moved away from this dual commitment to EU integration and transatlanticism by favouring ties with the United States over its relations with the key European partners. The Kaczynskis viewed the process of the deepening of European integration as a tool of German domination in Europe and saw the relations with the US as a counterbalance for both German and Russian influence. Unfortunately for the Kaczynskis, this came at a time when, in the second term of office, the Bush administration sought to improve the relations with Germany, while Poland's continuing presence in Iraq was gradually losing its significance as a tool of Polish-American 'strategic partnership' (indeed, it never had as much significance as the Polish policy makers hoped it would).

For this reason the Kaczynskis embraced the American proposal to place the elements of the so-called anti-missile shield in Poland and in the Czech Republic. It was for them a chance for an upgrade of Poland's role as a major US partner in Europe.

It should be added that this view of the shield was by no means confined to the Kaczynskis' supporters and was endorsed by some opposition politicians and independent foreign policy experts (while others remained critical).

2. The 'Europeisation' of Poland's public opinion and its implications for the transatlantic relations

The Iraq intervention, and especially the Polish participation in it had been deeply unpopular with the majority of the public opinion. Such critical attitudes became even stronger as the news of Polish casualties as well as continued mayhem in Iraq reached Poland. In time, the criticism of the war in Iraq had started to erode the generally positive views of the US and the US role in the world, which were prevailing in Poland following the fall of communism. This trend is clearly visible in the GMF Transatlantic Trends Survey. Thus in 2008 only 34% of the Poles thought it was desirable for the US to exert strong leadership in world affairs, while 46% were of the opposite opinion. For comparison, in 2002 (the first TT Survey) 64% of the Poles supported strong US leadership while only 22% were opposed to it. It should be noticed here that the attitudes of the Polish public are fairly close to the average TT results for 11 EU members, where 34 percent of the respondents supports US leadership. At the same time, more than two-thirds of the Poles were supportive of EU leadership in global affairs (a tall order at the moment), again very much in line with the European average. The average temperature of Poles' feelings towards the USA is on TT 'thermometer' is 55 (out of 100) as compared to EU11 average of 52. Romania, the most pro-American EU member, has 66 out of 100.

The 2008 TT Survey demonstrates that on the majority of foreign policy issues Polish attitudes are closer to the EU average rather than that of the US. In a number of cases (such as democracy promotion), the Poles were more skeptical than other EU members and (just like other Central Europeans) less interested and dedicated to tackling global issues). One issue where Poles and Americans differ most widely is the use of force in international affairs, which Poles strongly oppose and do not seem to believe in its legitimacy under any circumstances. This might be a direct response to the Iraq fiasco, but the difference may also result from different historical experiences.

This evolution of Poland's public opinion seems to be strongly related to the perceived success of Poland's EU membership. While immediately after the accession in May 2004 a large part of the public were apprehensive about the consequences of joining the EU, soon the support for EU integration had started to rise rapidly up to more than 80%. By the second half of 2007, it had become clear that the majority of Poles favoured more pro-European rather than pro-American foreign policy, that is exactly the opposite of the policy pursued by Jarosław Kaczyński's government.

3. The transatlantic dimension of Tusk's foreign policy

Following the 2007 elections, Poland has had a conservative-liberal government led by Donald Tusk cohabiting with a conservative-nationalist president, Lech Kaczynski. In the Polish constitutional system, the power lies mostly with the Prime Minister's office, nonetheless the President has special prerogatives in the field of foreign policy. Polish foreign policy has therefore been marked by a rivalry between these two centres of power, which makes it difficult to define the Polish foreign policy agenda.

Responding to popular demand, during the election campaign in the autumn of 2007 Donald Tusk, the leader of the victorious Civic Platform party, promised to complete the gradual withdrawal of Polish troops from Iraq. This election promise was fulfilled in the autumn of 2008, which met with the criticism of both the President Lech Kaczynski as well as the key opposition party Law and Justice (PiS).

The second issue in Polish-American relations, which was addressed during the 2007 elections, was the placement of the US anti-missile shield in Poland. Tusk promised to review the negotiations, initiated by the Kaczynski government in 2006, from the viewpoint of specific benefits for Poland's security. Thus Tusk made it clear that he did not regard the installation of the shield as an improvement in Polish security by the virtue of the presence of a piece of American military hardware on Poland's soil. On the contrary, he assumed that the shield in itself was a liability which needed to be compensated by other measures. The negotiations were concluded in August 2008. In exchange for hosting the shield, the Bush administration promised to beef up Poland's obsolete air defense system as well as to give Poland additional security guarantees. Since the signing of the agreement in the wake of the Russian invasion of Georgia, public opinion in Poland, long hostile to the project, made a U-turn and the outcome of the negotiations was supported by a clear majority of Poles. However, later on this support had started to wane again.

The Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008 and the subsequent partition of this country highlighted the importance of the security issues for Poland's transatlantic agenda. It also demonstrated different responses between the president and the government. While both centers of power share the critical view of Russia's foreign policy and the need to contain it, the differences concern the means that can be applied to this purpose and particularly the language of the debate on Russia. The government has been avoiding ostentatious political gestures favoured by President Kaczynski and putting more trust in international – especially European – cooperation, e.g. by endorsing Sarkozy's mediation efforts and refraining from the opposition to the opening of EU-Russia Partnership talks.

At the same time both the president and the government supported the prospective inclusion of Georgia and Ukraine in the preparations for NATO membership by offering them Membership Action Plans.

4. Polish responses to Barack Obama's victory

During the months of the American presidential campaign the Polish public opinion had been less enthralled by the race and less enthusiastic about Barack Obama's candidacy than the public in Germany and other West European countries. According to the Transatlantic Trends Survey, relatively few Poles (28%) thought that Obama's victory would improve US-EU relations (as opposed to 51% of the Europeans who so believed).

The coverage of the American presidential elections in the Polish media emphasized the skillfulness of the Obama's campaign rather than substantive issues which were debated by the key candidates. Especially the Polish right wing media tried to convey the impression that Obama was a 'lightweight' candidate who owed his success to 'Obamamania' generated by 'liberal' and 'left wing' Western media. The Polish media and politicians also watched closely the reactions of both Obama and McCain to the war in Georgia, usually praising the latter's response.

However, in the immediate run up to the elections the Polish media coverage of the campaign greatly intensified and a majority of Poles came to support Obama's candidacy over McCain, thus joining the European mainstream.

According to the TT Survey, when asked about the priorities of both the new US administration and the EU leaders, the Poles enumerated combating international terrorism, economy and Russia as the key challenges. The key difference between Poles and other Europeans (especially Germans) was the low priority given by Poles to the climate change and relatively high priority given to Russia. (The poll was taken before the events of August 2008.)

5. The relations between the West and Russia and the post-Soviet region as the focal point of the new transatlantic agenda

The Polish expectations of the new transatlantic agenda concern regional rather than global issues. They are dominated by **the Russian resurgence** in the region, as exemplified by both the military intervention in Georgia as well as the recent assault against Ukrainian energy security.

Poland will expect the new US administration as well as the EU to be ‘tough on Russia’ and not to succumb to the illusions of ‘strategic partnership’ with Russia to tackle global issues (such as Iran). At the same time it would welcome substantive upgrading of the relations between the transatlantic community and the countries of the region, particularly those covered by the Polish-Swedish ‘Eastern Partnership’ initiative.

Poland will like to see the US and its European partners taking steps towards revitalising NATO as a multilateral foreign policy instrument, putting emphasis on its traditional functions as regional security provider to its members. Further **NATO expansion** should be kept on the agenda. At the same time, Poland will continue to contribute to NATO’s mission in Afghanistan.

Poland would like to see both the EU and the US taking steps to safeguard Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. Transatlantic cooperation will be needed to solve other ‘**frozen conflicts**’, which give Russia an excuse to interfere in the affairs of its neighbours and former Soviet republics: Moldova (Transnistria) and Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh) as well as potential conflicts such as Crimea in Ukraine.

Energy security will remain a key challenge for the nascent European foreign policy. Although the key to tackling this issue lies within the EU and the creation of genuine free market in energy within Europe, transatlantic cooperation will be required in the establishment of alternative supply routes, which are not controlled by Russia (eg. the Nabucco pipeline).

Last but not least, **democracy promotion** should become a part of the new transatlantic agenda. Barack Obama administration has a unique chance to restore American image abroad and part of this process would be to ‘de-toxify’ the concept of democracy promotion, largely compromised during the Bush era. The revitalised Community of Democracies, which was established in the wake of the Warsaw declaration of June 2000, should become the key tool of transatlantic cooperation, while both US and UE and its member states should create synergy between old and new initiatives in the field of democracy promotion, such as the newly established European Partnership for Democracy.

6. Bilateral Polish-US issues and their impact on the EU-US transatlantic agenda

The outcome of the anti-missile shield negotiations was broadly seen in Poland as a success (with both the government and the president vying to take credit for it). It is therefore expected that the new US administration will stand by the provisions of the agreement. This concerns not only the placement of the single battery of the Patriot missiles (as is stipulated in the agreement) but the subsequent

sale of additional missiles and other high-tech military equipment to Poland. Poland will expect its EU partners, especially those which are also NATO members, to stand by the declaration of the Bucharest summit stating that the shield is a contribution to European security.

The continuing requirement for Polish citizens to obtain a visa before traveling to the US still causes popular resentment towards the US administration. Any progress in this field would help to improve the public perceptions of Polish-American relations and should best be achieved within the EU format.

Conclusions: is there a threat of an EU divide regarding the transatlantic agenda?

Poland's perception of the transatlantic agenda has largely been shaped by the Russian resurgence in Georgia, Ukraine and throughout the post-Soviet region. The situation in the Middle East (Iran, Iraq and Palestine) is viewed as significant in so far as progress in this area would allow the US and the EU to devote more attention to the resurgent Russia. Other issues, such as climate change or the new global financial architecture, which are a priority for Poland's EU partners, are seen as less urgent. This does not mean that Poland will oppose the EU transatlantic agenda in these and other policy areas. On the contrary, Poland is likely to support such initiatives as long as they do not contradict Polish foreign policy objectives. Poland also expects that its concerns will be taken seriously by key European partners, especially Germany and France, and that Poland and other new member states will be recognised as legitimate contributors to EU-wide debate on the aims and priorities of EU foreign policy and the new transatlantic agenda. Attempts to marginalize or silence the concerns of NMS could bring back the specter of the old and by now obsolete divisions from the early Bush era. The responsibility for establishing a common European agenda vis-à-vis the US lies with all the EU partners.

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Analyses & Opinions

No. 6/90

Analyses & Opinions is a series of policy briefs highlighting pressing issues and presenting policy recommendations.

Series is prepared with the support of Trust for Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe.

The present issue has been written and published as part of the project: "Shifting Euro-Atlantic Commitments? Continuity and Change in Poland's Foreign Policy" supported by the German Marshall Fund of the United States



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Series Coordinator: Rafał Załęski

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